



COVID-19 Impact on SEWA members

Note prepared by: SEWA Bharat

April 2020

About SEWA

More than 90% of Indian workers are informal economy workers: workers with no formal employment contract, and few to no active state protections for their work or well-being. Despite comprising much of India's workforce and contributing substantially to India's GDP, they are routinely undervalued and exploited. Within this socially and economically disadvantaged group, women face a double disadvantage due to cultural, educational, social (uniquely gendered), and other barriers.

Founded by Ela Bhatt in 1972, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) works to empower poor women in India's informal economy by equipping them with both the personal confidence and practical tools necessary to fulfil their needs and exercise their rights. On the one hand, SEWA "organizes" women so that they can have a strengthened collective voice. On the other, SEWA runs development programs - relating to health, skills, livelihoods, etc. - that can empower women to become self-sufficient members of their community. SEWA envisions creating a society where no woman feels afraid or alone.

With over 2 million active members across seventeen states, SEWA is one of India's largest and oldest trade unions and nonprofit organizations. At the national level, SEWA is coordinated by SEWA Bharat.

Introduction

According to the last published Census of India data, there are as many as 48.2 crore workers in India. Of these, only 3.3 crore are in the formal sector; the remaining 93 percent includes 11.9 crore farmers, 14.4 crore landless agricultural workers, and 21.9 crore non-agricultural workers. Almost none of them get a monthly pay cheque or bank transfer. Their cash flows are dependent on them working.

The informal sector, despite being a huge contributor to India's GDP, is often neglected when it comes to supportive policies especially in times of crises. Currently, with the spread of the COVID-19 virus, there is significant rallying by governments, policymakers and health professionals for 'social distancing' and maintenance of proper hygiene. This implies minimising contact with the outside world and taking precautionary personal hygiene measures such as frequent use of hand sanitisers, wearing masks when ill and other such.

While these advisories may seem simple enough to carry out for a large proportion of the formal sector workforce, they are exclusionary towards informal sector workers as it is impossible for them to observe these measures due to the nature of their livelihood and their socio-economic standing. For instance, a very quick study of informal sector workers across States and trades reveals unique challenges they are facing in combating this pandemic. SEWA is a central trade union that works with women in the informal sector.

We draw here from SEWA members and workers from 20 different trades across 11 states who were interviewed about their awareness of COVID, how it was already impacting their income and their families, their access to clean water, and medical services. Some key insights are presented below:

1. Difficulty in procuring essentials like ration and medicines because of panic buying, as well the shortage of supplies at the allocated PDS or ration shops.
2. Since many members are dependent on daily-wages, they are facing a challenge with a drastically reduced inflow of cash in hand for day to day necessities.
3. The ration being distributed is through the established network of registered members under the NFSA. Those who are not registered, or lack the proper documentation are not being able to avail the scheme.
4. Migrants constitute a sizable portion of the informal workforce in the country - they face acute uncertainty. They may have access to food through PDS or shelter homes, but they will be unable to pay rent.
5. Increasing concerns are centered around the access to health facilities, and growing shortage of necessities such as sanitary pads, and regular ongoing medication.
6. In rural areas, a shortage of freely available fodder as they are unable to go out and collect, as well as inability to reach markets with agricultural produce.

SEWA being a Central trade Union and the only one for the informal sector, had sent a petition to the Central Government for securing the lives and livelihood of the people working in this sector and many of the recommendations have been considered. SEWA is also carrying out advocacy at the state levels.

On March 26, the central government announced a relief package of 1.7 trillion rupees (US\$22.5 billion) to provide free food and cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable populations, and health insurance for healthcare workers, among other things. However, many workers in the informal sector may not be able to benefit from the relief package announced by the state as ensuring last-mile connectivity is likely to be a big constraint. Therefore, it is essential to develop and sustain linkages with the government to ensure the poor reap the much-needed benefits of the relief package.

SEWA has identified the following areas of interventions-

1. Support and supplement government measures, wherever possible
2. Finance their testing for COVID 19, where required as well as providing health care kits
3. Reach rations to vulnerable households especially those who are being left out of the PDS system.
4. Reach employment and hence income to households by making essential supplies such as masks, gowns, sanitisers etc.
5. SEWA has a unique network of grassroots leaders called agevans who would strengthen the government outreach through a mechanism of community monitoring of PDS and cash transfers. The main work for all these activities has to be done locally, and for that we will be supporting local 'agevans' or SEWA leaders with some remuneration.
6. SEWA has sponsored over 140 social enterprises which are run for and by the poor women. Unfortunately, as the lockdown proceeds each of these enterprises will lose their liquidity which will make it difficult to recover when the crisis is over.

Currently, taking cognizance of the nationwide lockdown and the resultant constraints in mitigating its impact on informal economy workers and their families, we hope to work around the following measures on a priority basis to provide immediate and short-term support –

Support and supplement government measures, where required as well as providing health care kits

- Create awareness and dispel fear among low-income households as there is reported aggression towards those who test negative or are symptomatic, and spread the importance of practising social distancing.
- Provide information regarding the schemes launched by central government and respective state governments, if any.
- Volunteer to work in collaboration when the government calls for help; stay in contact with local elected representatives. Facilitating provision of rations to vulnerable households especially those who are being left out of the PDS system is a top priority.
- SEWA has a vast network of grassroots leaders (agevans) amounting to approximately 5000, across 17 states in the country that will spearhead the linkages with the government at the local level. SEWA and its agevans have also been recording informational messages and videos and circulate them among our informal women worker members ~ *A mobilisation cost of INR 200 per agevan per day will be essential to remunerate this work i.e. INR 10,00000.*
- Once lockdown gets over, our local outreach centres called SEWA Shakti Kendras which are located within the informal settlements that house the informal workers can propel linking the beneficiaries to the relevant government schemes.

Finance the testing for COVID 19, providing with basic healthcare kit

- Through our deep networks within the communities, we shall prepare a log of those seeking testing for COVID and will provide them with the fee for getting tested as it is currently not free of cost~ *cost of a COVID test is INR 4500 in a private lab.*
- Issue orders and provide raw materials to SEWA's enterprises across the country to make sanitisers and face masks ~ *total cost of producing each unit of sanitiser and cotton washable face mask is xx and INR 50 respectively. SEWA Lok Swasthya, a social enterprise dedicated towards health services has already been licensed by the government to produce hand sanitizers.*
- The basic healthcare kit will consist of toiletries and health packets ~ *total cost of the toiletry and health packet is approximately INR 350 and INR 650 respectively (exclusive of transportation cost)*

Ensure sustenance of affected households and their daily needs

- During the lockdown, it has become practically impossible for many households employed in the informal sector to sustain their daily lives in absence of newly generated incomes. Therefore, SEWA will procure and supply food packets to such households ~ *each food packet will cost approximately INR 1000 (exclusive of transportation cost).*
- The toiletries, health and food packets will collectively cost approximately INR 2000 per household.

Support rural livelihoods

- Help women to get their agricultural produce to market by hiring tempos/rickshaws.
- Help to buy fodder from nearby fodder banks.